

IN MEMORY OF GEOFF WONG

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It is incomprehensible to me that I am writing this memorial article about Geoff Wong, who passed away on November 6, 2013, after a brief battle with cancer that took his life at the age of 62.

It was August of 1987 that I first met Geoff at the San Francisco Plant and Flower Show, where I was an unknown grower entering plants for the first time. That year Geoff was a judge and fortunately could not display any of his own plants. Had he done so I would not have won so many awards, I am quite sure. He was very excited to meet me, and showered me with compliments, not only on the quality of my plants but on their presentation using attractive and unusual pottery, as well as decorative rock crystals and various moss ground coverings. Presentation of things like carnivorous plants was very important to Geoff, as I soon found out. Geoffrey Wong was the supreme leader of such things.

An example of this I witnessed soon thereafter, when he hosted a gathering of the fledgling Bay Area Carnivorous Plant Society (BACPS) at his home, then in Palo Alto, where the yard itself looked like a botanical garden. With dramatic flair, he unveiled his latest hand-made terrarium (yes – he built the terrarium of metal and glass himself!) by removing the frontpiece of mylar and cardboard that he used to increase the grow light's reflection. The audience collectively gasped. It was like a window upon another world, a potted-landscaped terrarium, something I had never seen before. In the center was an exquisite *Nepenthes glabrata*, with ground as well as upper pitchers, and surrounding it other plants such as a clump of rosetted sundews, a Mexican butterwort, Venus Flytrap, and an extraordinary *Heliophora* – all richly colored and flawless. When I asked how he could grow these various genera all together he explained how they were in individual pots of their preferred soil mix, and he filled the spaces between with peat and introduced mosses that he groomed and manicured to perfection. To this day it remains one of the most incredible carnivorous plant terrariums I have ever seen.

Geoff once told me he became obsessed with carnivorous plants after seeing a photo of *Cephalotus* while in college in Los Angeles. I believe it was the first species he obtained, quite possibly from the now defunct Plant Shop's Botanical Garden in Reseda, California, a legendary retail nursery he turned me on to. Years later he would win awards for his incredibly enormous pot of *Cephalotus* with more than one hundred yawning pitchers, grown by inserting dozens of leaves into the soil and then drumming his fingers for a couple of years until they turned into a dense mat of plants. Meticulousness and patience were two of Geoff's many virtues.

While he grew many plants, he was also extremely selective. He was not the type who craved every species and hybrid in existence. He had a few *Sarracenia* and sundews on a sunny porch at his later Victorian house in San Francisco, but space was limited. He converted a bedroom of the house to a grow room with various grow light chambers and terrariums, specializing in choice and challenging varieties such as *Nepenthes*, *Heliophora*, and *Genlisea*.

Geoff's creativeness was amply shown with the latter mentioned genus. The photo of his corkscrew plant grown in a box of *Sphagnum* moss with the traps suspended in water below that appears in my book *The Savage Garden* and more recently in Andreas Fleischmann's monograph made him a household name among carnivorous plant growers.

Geoff's interests were not confined to flesh-eating plants. He grew many miniature orchids, brightly colored cacti, and bred albino mosquito fish so they could be seen in ponds. He shared all of



Geoff Wong. Photos by Robert Co.

these liberally with many friends. He once showed me a clavichord (an early keyboard instrument) he built from scratch. He was a great chef, once entertaining myself and friends to a French-Asian fusion meal complete with a green tea tasting. He chased eclipses around the world and took botanical trips to the Andes and Borneo and other exotic locations.

It was also Geoff who was responsible for Ch'ien Lee, a native Californian, moving to Borneo to pursue a life there, and discovering and re-discovering many of our most beloved *Nepenthes* as a result.

Geoff was also greatly involved with his enormous extended family of sisters, nieces, and cousins, enthraling them with his love of nature.

Upon his retirement from his job as a senior scientist for a biotech company a few years ago, Geoff happily told me he was busier than ever. He was a volunteer assistant to Kirsten Natoli, horticulturalist at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, who raved about his work in a talk she gave at his well-attended memorial. His friendship with Judith Finn of the Berkeley Botanical Garden goes back decades, and he also had a long relationship with the Conservatory of Flowers. At California Carnivores, we have countless plants he has given us over the years.

But most importantly Geoff Wong's personality can be best described through a phone call I received from a distraught grower who called me upon hearing of his passing. As a newcomer to the hobby attending the 1999 ICPS conference in San Francisco, he felt that many old timers of some fame were nearly unapproachable – but not Geoff Wong. Geoff was always eager to welcome with open arms anyone who wanted to learn, sharing his knowledge with those who simply asked.

As he wrote in his deeply moving “Final Farewell”, written on October 22, 2013, and read and distributed at his memorial:

“The greatest memorial that you can build for me lies within your own hearts. I ask each of you to carry on my life’s mission. Wherever you go, wherever you are, whomever you meet, whomever you are with, please do something that helps that other person grow and become a more complete person, and as you do so, please think of me.

“I now rest in peace.”

Goodbye, Geoffrey.

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